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Poetic Irony in Tragedy

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Ours is an age of specialization in literary criticism. At mid-century William Empson discussed seven varieties of ambiguity, and critics have increasingly devoted themselves to examining types and distinctions in irony and other figurative language found in drama, fiction and poetry. No doubt refinements in the analysis of a subject are useful, for we learn what things are by taking them apart and scrutinizing the parts. In the natural sciences we have learned all too well that knowledge is power for ill as well as for good, and that we dare not consider anything concerning humanity as beneath our interest. On the other hand we may feel that our explosion of knowledge in many fields has left more facts or dust than wisdom or light. And many students even in the arts nowadays may reflect wryly on Dr. Johnson's dictum, "Nothing is too small for so small a creature as man," and instead incline to believe that in our dying century many things are too much for so brief a creature as man.

I would therefore beg indulgence for making some remarks of a specious sort concerning the value of poetry both as a vehicle for irony in tragedy and as a manifestation in itself of irony. In other words, I suggest that poetic utterance in tragedy at once enriches and heightens the irony latent in dialogue and situations, and that it does so because such poetry is itself a thing of irony.

This is not to say, or course, that poetry is irony, but rather that in essential ways tragic poetry is part of the entity irony, existing as a species of the genus. If we accept as necessities of irony in tragedy the elements of shock (the disturbed surprise that attends the unexpected), tension and crisis (the excitement of a growing awareness), and relief (the awareness that the shock is a fulfillment), it is possible to establish kinship between two concepts which we are not accustomed to associate. Let us consider whether poetry in tragedy, by embodying important constituents of irony, does not thereby partake of its nature and develop it.

Great poetry is customarily charged with the quality of surprise to our imagination and feelings. The qualification "great" is important. For while it is true that there is much good poetry of the sort that calms and pacifies while enlarging our sensibilities, great poetry is that which excites and enlivens our senses, concentrates our attention, and deepens our awareness of human life. It finally leaves us serene, but this value is achieved only at the expense of

imaginative, emotional and mental turmoil. Such poetry, full as it is of human struggle and passion—for what is more dynamic than the nature of mankind?—is dramatic poetry. Although much dramatic verse is hardly poetry at all, being rhetorical and didactic, yet much ostensibly narrative poetry is sufficiently vigorous to be called dramatic—witness the opening scenes of Milton's *Paradise Lost* and Dante's urgent confronting of the mysteries of heaven and hell in *Divina Commedia*. But how does dramatic poetry surprise us? It does this by its habitual use of metaphor, which, by positing identity of things essentially unlike, continually startles the beholder.

We may recall Lear's description of Goneril after she has scorned him:

We'll no more meet, no more see one another:
 But yet thou art my flesh, my blood, my daughter;
 Or rather a disease that's in my flesh,
 Which I must needs call mine: thou art a boil,
 A plague—sore, or embossed carbuncle,
 In my corrupted blood. (II, iv, 228—33)

The contrast involved in this revelation of a daughter as at once the flesh and blood but yet the disease of her father is a sharp and mighty one. Besides this arresting trait of the lines, the contrast comes to us quite unexpectedly, and this is so notwithstanding that we have already been made amply aware of Goneril's foulness. For though we by now know Goneril, we never throughout the play become reconciled to the enormity of her grossness, here seen as an organic malignity in the flesh and blood of her father. And every metaphorical statement of her as an ungrateful child fills us with renewed revulsion, with a stab of horror that nature can be so unkind. So we are shocked by the irony involved in the disparity of the "equation" of daughter with plague—sore.

But to see fully that the irony of dramatic poetry is not the same as customary verbal irony, and also that the same effects could not be equally well achieved by use of metaphor in prose, we may turn to another passage in *King Lear*. After the king has arrived at Regan's house, Regan greets him with the statement, "I am glad to see your highness," and Lear says:

Regan, I think you are; I know what reason
 I have to think so: if thou shouldst not be glad,
 I would divorce me from thy mother's tomb,
 Sepulchring an adultress....

Beloved Regan,
 Thy sister's naught: O Regan, she hath tied

Sharp—tooth'd unkindness, like a vulture, here.

(Points to his heart) (II, iv, 135—42)

In this speech the word “reason” is an instance of verbal irony, reminding us that the same Lear who had exhibited a foolishly calculating mind by dividing his kingdom between his two false eldest daughters now believes that his generosity is reason for Reagan's alleged glad welcome. For we are aware of the ingratitude that his reason has gained for him from the hands of Goneril. Similarly, Lear's “thy sister's naught” is an ironic verbal echo of his warning to Cordelia: “Nothing will come of nothing: speak again” (I, i, 100) ; it is his daughters to whom he gave all that are now to him worthless. But irony of metaphor here consists in Lear's cry that Goneril “hath tied / Sharp—tooth'd unkindness, like a vulture” in his heart. Here again we are alarmed by the forceful horror of the figure, by the violence done our imagination and feelings by the picture of a daughter binding a bird of prey to the heart of her father. We are shocked, appalled. We can imagine nothing more fantastic or more incredible than this sudden oblique and momentary flash of light shed upon a human relationship. Lear's statement comes like a tongue of flame, showing at once his pain and a truth he himself as yet does not see. And since in this effect brevity and economy of phrase, together with what may be called the hypnotic rhythm of meter, figure as causes, it is not possible to say that prose has similar value for dramatic irony. Though prose may use metaphor, it is too casual in its rhythms, too modest in its intentions, ever to achieve the deliberate, harsh strength of “I would divorce me from thy mother's tomb, / Sepulchring an adulteress.”

In this sustained predicating of likeness between things unlike, dramatic poetry engenders tension, or the excitement that attends the progressive revelation through metaphor. Even in Macbeth's expression of despair upon hearing of the death of his wife, the exhausted tone of voice that the situation calls for cannot lessen the high attention that we are required to bring to bear because of the rapid succession of metaphors. Within ten lines we find the conception that life is futile embodied by seven separate figures: the petty pace of a succession of tomorrows, the lighting of fools to death, and the depiction of life as a brief candle, a walking shadow, a poor player, and a tale told by an idiot. Not all poetry is so highly charged, of course, but seldom anywhere in dramatic, and especially, tragic poetry will we find much time to relax imaginatively or emotionally.

The satisfaction that we derive from the irony of dramatic poetry is a third element shared by irony itself. Even as we are not troubled when we reflect, after the climax, that the fate of Oedipus and of Lear is their due return for presumptuousness, so too we are finally calmed by the truth that follows the imaginative excess. To put it more simply, we know that calling

Goneril a plague—sore and a vulture is extravagance, and yet we are aware that it is plain truth—not fact but reality. Our perception of the naturalness, for purposes of drama, of the literal falsity involved in metaphor renders all exaggeration, however unscientific, ironically congruent to us. And just as the restoring of equilibrium in an extreme character results in that equanimity in the beholders which satisfies them, so does the more moderate excitement and surprise of poetic irony, sustained for the duration of a play, ultimately compose the faculties of the spectators. A succession of metaphorical “shocks” in tragedy seems at the same time to prepare us for and to complement or reinforce the great shock of reversal or recognition that constitutes the central irony of the play.

Thus while we cannot say that dramatic poetry and irony in drama are different terms for the same thing, we should be aware of certain essential relationships between them. Both have shock value, a value which differs in scale rather than in quality. For as neither the significant reversal nor the poetry can be taken from tragedy, each is highly important. Both dramatic poetry and irony of situation tend to express a single truth, that extravagance culminates in revelation and fulfillment: presumption of whatever sort recoils to self—insight and imaginative vigor belies the facts. Finally, the pleasure of dramatic poetry is like that received from the the ironic situation. Serenity is the tone of the satisfaction from both, and a greater stability and integrity follows from learning of the essential fitness of many apparent contrasts, and even of the seeming contradiction of facts or images in metaphor. Hence, irony of poetry and irony of situation in tragedy deepen our awareness of true relationships, and function together in helping to make us more alert to the complexity of experience and more appreciative of it.

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